

I spent the month of July on an International Student Volunteer (ISV) project and adventure tour in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia. I flew directly to De Vinci from Detroit but wasn't able to go into Rome because I had to wait for my next boarding pass because I couldn't get it at Detroit. I flew across to Split and went through customs and then onto Zagreb the night before the rest of our group arrived. After walking around Zagreb a little the next morning, a fellow group member and I met the rest of the group at Zagreb airport and headed to Bosnia. That night we arrived at our home for the next two weeks called Mehoric near the city of Kakanj. Before we went to Mehoric we had dinner with the mayor and tried burek for the first time. We slept on cots at Mehoric, 4-6 people to a room, one bathroom that got plugged up early on, and a shower. I preferred to use the outhouse and the stream; both smelled better and seemed a lot cleaner. While we were there for two weeks we picked up a lot of garbage, helped build a bridge, stained the building we were living in, cleared tall grass, made paths, and repaired some rooms in another building on the site. Mehoric had not been lived in since French U.N. troops used it to set up a communications link with Sarajevo during the siege, besides that, the forestry company used it as a staging point every morning before they went deeper into the woods. ISV works jointly with a local program, and the goal of this project was to turn Mehoric into a recreational area for the local community like it was prior to the war. The whole project is on a time table to be completed by 2021, and our group was the first ISV volunteer group to assist the local organization with this.

We spent our free time playing cards, drinking beer and slitovice (a-z, homemade brandy), cooking, listening to locals play accordions, but mostly just talking about anything and everything. Many people from the city and surrounding villages came out to visit us and we were featured in the local newspaper and on local TV. The mayor of Kakanj visited us quite regularly; brought us Coke and pillows and when we left Kakanj gave us a few gifts to remember his town. It will be interesting to see how things have progressed with the project site by the time completion. Last I heard, the next ISV group was 6 girls and would not be staying at Mehoric like we did, but in a house near Kraljeva Sutjeska with a real bathroom, shower, and electricity. We were told that they would not even be working at the Mehoric site the second week, so I'm not really sure what the future groups will be doing. There was certainly enough work to be done at Mehoric in my opinion. If you have google earth, you can find Mehoric at N 44 12'54.59" E 18 13'16.35" and looking for my photos.

After the 2 weeks in Mehoric, our group started the adventure tour by traveling to Dubrovnik. We made a quick stop in Sarajevo to pick up one of our group member's luggage which was lost a few weeks back in New York. Dubrovnik has a large walled city which was a free city for most of its history unlike Split and other cities on the coast which were part of the Venetian Empire, Turkish, etc. at some point. The group took the city walls tour there, took a lot of photos. The next morning we took off up the Dalmatian Coast on our hotel/boat the Moja Maja (my Maja), a boat that the 74 year old Croatian captain built himself, to Korcula, the home of Marko Polo. Korcula is also a walled city but much smaller than Dubrovnik on the island of the same name. After shopping, exploring, and drinking in Korcula for a few days we went to the Island of Brac which has a town called Bol which in turn has a beach called the Golden Horn which is rated the top beach in all of Europe by some magazine I guess. Then we went to Omis, which is on the mainland. Omis was used by pirates because its large fresh water river made it difficult for anyone but the best captains to sail up it. We spent a couple nights there, and were pestered by Australians that seemed to follow us up the coast and partied till 5am every night to the displeasure of our captain who had to wake up early every morning. After Omis, we went to Split which is the largest city on the coast and 2nd largest city in Croatia. The main attraction in Split is Diocletian's palace, but there were a lot of other things to do there, I walked around the city and found the home of the very popular football team there Hajduk. Everywhere you go in Dalmatia, you find graffiti with Hajduk propaganda. One night there was a reggae concert on the beach there and some of the people in my group partied with the band afterwards.

We left the Moja Maja in Split where it waited for another ISV group to travel back down the coast. Our group went inland to a camp with a waterfall you could jump off of. We kayaked here the next day then went to a hotel near the Plitvice Lakes National park where there are a lot of falls which grow taller because the plants that hang over the falls become calcified eventually. The largest fall was 79 meters I think.

We traveled back to Zagreb and stayed in a hostel with all kinds of different kids from all kinds of countries. The hostel was near the Kras (pronounced Crush) factory which is a major candy company in the region and we all got quite a haul from the outlet store. We took the tram into the city a few times and shopped a lot there. Some of the group members were too hung over and opted out of a walking tour of the old town, so I took someone's place on that and our guide told us about the upper and lower towns. There were actually battles between the two parts of the city which were separated by a river which has since been drained. The highlights of the tour were the Cathedral and the roof of the Church of St. Mark with the Croatian and Zagreb seals in bright tiles.

We headed into Slovenia and visited Lake Bled which is was really beautiful. We took a bike tour around the whole lake and a few of us went down the ski run on a rail car. We went through the highest mountains in the Balkan Peninsula and Italy to get to Bovec, this valley with an airfield and rivers. Bovec was filled with outfitter stores and adventure agencies. You could find places to go skydiving, paragliding, rafting, climbing, caving, hydrospeeding, hang gliding, cycling, etc. I did the hydrospeeding there which is going down rapids on a sled that you lay on, your legs hang off and you kick with fins on to steer yourself through the rapids.

Ljubljana, Slovenia was our last stop and we had one evening to get any last souvenirs and explore the city. We had to wake up early the next morning and flew back home. The group flew into Frankfurt, Germany and some of them told me there was a problem with the airport being shutdown because of an unattended bag, but otherwise they all made it back safely. The one other group member that arranged their own flight is at the time of writing, visiting friends in Belgium. I went to Amsterdam and had to rush through to catch my connection back to Detroit, my luggage had to come on the next flight even though it was cleared through to Detroit when I checked-in in Ljubljana. Overall, the whole experience was great; it really made the world seem so small. I can't wait to go back to Europe, and someday I hope to see Bosnia and Croatia again.